



### **“Core Identity”**

**Scripture – 1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, January 28, 2024**

The first frame of a comic strip simply shows an egg. Second frame: the shell begins to crack. Hmmm, something inside is trying to break out. Third frame: a chick has emerged and is walking over to pick up a pair of binoculars. Fourth frame: He’s looking through the binoculars at the world. Fifth frame: there is a look of horror on his face and he has tossed the binoculars aside. Final frame: he’s crawling back inside the shell.

A spot-on commentary on our world today. As one colleague puts it, “There is so much bad in the world that we sometimes feel like crawling back under the covers or hovering in our homes. However, there’s another take on why that chick wanted to crawl back into its shell. “Maybe it was not that he was horrified by what is happening in the world. Perhaps it was the realization that once freed from the shell, he had the heavy responsibility of making choices and living with the consequences of his decisions.”<sup>1</sup>

How we live matters. It determines the quality of our lives and impacts the lives of so many others. Jesus called on us to love one another and to treat others the way we want to be treated. He called on us to be compassionate to those who are hurting and to be generous with people in need.

In his letter to the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul named nine characteristics of people of faith. His list is well known: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23).

How well are we living up to those expectations? Mohandas Gandhi once quipped, “I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Ouch!

We followers of Jesus do not always live up to his expectations of us, do we?

Today’s passage comes from the opening words of a letter that the Apostle Paul sent to Christians living in Corinth. For your mental map, Corinth is 65 miles west of Athens.

Early on, while living as a tent-maker, Paul had formed this Christian community and had schooled them in the ways of Jesus for more than a year. Once upon a time, Camilla made me stand on the Bema in Corinth where Paul preached. I hammed it up – acting like I was preaching fire and brimstone. It was all very dramatic.

Once Paul's fledgling congregation reached a certain level of faithfulness, Paul bid them adieu and set off to establish other churches. While he was away from Corinth, word reached him that the people were no longer living as Paul had taught them. Their flaws were far outdistancing their virtues and his beloved community was fracturing into competing factions.

Paul became furious and wanted to tear into them. He addressed his concerns in a letter which would be read before the entire congregation. He could have begun his letter by upbraiding them. "Dear Corinthian Christians, have you lost your marbles or just your morals? Do I need to put my evangelistic efforts on hold and sail back to Corinth and clean house?"

But that's not how he began his letter. In fact, he did exactly the opposite. Listen again to the way he began his correspondence. "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified – that is: made holy – in Christ Jesus;" **Then, Paul says,** "called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." **Then,** "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." **And then,** "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you."

It is a beautiful, gracious, uplifting beginning to his letter. Why would he begin his correspondence with such flowery praise if he had a large bone to pick? Perhaps Paul was remembering advice from his mother: "Paul, before you criticize someone, start with something nice to say."

Maybe. But, here's what I think. I think Paul began his letter that way because he was reminding them of their core identity. They were not terrible people, but they were way off base. He called them "saints" because they were called to live a God-filled life, but they were falling short; as it turns out, way short.

We know that the perception you have of yourself highly influences your behavior. If you think of yourself as not too bright, you will say and do clumsy things. But if you think of yourself as competent, you will interact with others with confidence and skill. A colleague reminds us that "People sense how they are viewed by others and respond accordingly. If people believe that someone has high regard for them, they often live up to that expectation."<sup>2</sup>

I think that may be what Paul was up to. He began his letter by reminding them that he had high expectations. They were saints; that is, people who are meant to live God-filled lives. Then, after that opening reminder, he begins to wrap them on the knuckles for the ways they have lived at odds with their core identity. They have splintered into factions, they have tossed their sexual morals out the window, if they have a grievance with a fellow member they drag them into court, they are in each other's faces over trivial religious practices, and the wealthy are showing contempt for the poor. They were meant to live God-filled lives, but they were failing miserably. Could anything be done about it? How could they find their way back to the lives they were intended to live? How could they truly live into that title: Saint?

Paul spills a lot of ink before he finally reaches the answer. And his answer becomes one of the most well-known passages in all of Scripture. He writes: "If I do not have love, I am nothing...Love is patient.

Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

If we are to live a God-filled life, love will be at our core.

In his book, *To the End of the Land*, author David Grossman tells the story of two brothers. When the older brother Adam is thirteen years old, he begins to exhibit the signs of compulsive behavior. He washes his hands after he touches any object; he goes through elaborate rituals of speech and action before he can move from one room to another. He stops in the midst of what he is doing to count his fingers and blink his eyes for a designated number of times. His distraught parents read every book they can find and take him to every expert they can afford, but nothing much changes.

Then one day his nine-year-old brother took charge. He said to his older brother, “Let me do the eye thing today, then you won’t have to do it.” Reluctantly, Adam gave up his obsessive blinking and lets his brother do it. A few days later it was the finger counting. A few days after that another little compulsion. And last of all the hand washing. The younger brother washed his hands often enough and hard enough to serve for both of them.

A few years later, the boys’ mother tells how the story came out. She says, “They played computer games and football, chatted for hours, made up characters, and every once in a while, they cooked pasta together.” And then the mother says, “And while they did all of that – don’t ask me how it happened – one of them saved the other.”<sup>3</sup>

It is vital for us to remember our core identity. We are called to live a God-filled life which is a life of love. If we live a life of love, we will learn how to radiate calm and compassion. If we live a life of love, it will spark within us the healing energy of kindness. If we live a life of love, when we meet someone who is wounded, it will ignite our empathy. If we live a life of love, when we encounter injustice, it will kindle courage in our chest. If we live a life of love, when we notice a need, it will generate a generous spirit.

Many people begin their day much like that chick that saw all of the bad news in the world and retreated into its shell. What if we began the day with the reminder that we are saints who are expected to live a love-filled life?

I am grateful that I would never need to write a letter similar to First Corinthians to our church family. Westminster is brimming with loving saints.

Writer Brian Doyle, says, “There is love, and then there is everything else. You either walk toward love or away from it with every breath you draw.”<sup>4</sup>

God has high expectations of each of us as individuals and together as a church family. May we be faithful in living up to those lofty expectations as we show the world the power of love.

#### NOTES

1. Kirk Byron Jones, “False Security is a Lovely, Loathsome Thing,” *The Christian Century*, June 2023.
2. Harry B. Adams, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 255.
3. David Bartlett, “Great Words of Faith: Love.”
4. Brian Doyle, “The Final Frontier,” *Sojourners Magazine*, January 2016, p. 38.